

## **The *Chicago Tribune*'s Coverage of the Great Chicago Fire**

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The Great Chicago Fire caused 300 deaths, 90,000 people to become homeless, destroyed 17,500 buildings, and a total loss of \$200,000,000. And at the same time, the *Chicago Tribune* practically became a celebrity. The *Tribune* covered many aspects of the Great Fire. Besides providing essential information, the *Tribune* gave editorials persuading Chicago to cheer up and rebuild the city, which had been destroyed by the fire. This was the greatest help that the *Tribune* gave, and had a huge impact on the city and *Tribune* then and now. To help Chicago avoid potential disaster, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote about fire prevention; later, when 1871's Great Chicago Fire erupted, the *Tribune* gave detailed fire prevention and confidence-boosting stories, which convinced Chicagoans to help rebuild the city, making it much more developed today than before.

It was just an ordinary summer in Chicago when complaints of the city's fire safety and state of being started showing up in the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper almost every day. One reason for this was the buildings in Chicago. Chicago's buildings were mostly wooden, and all were a fire hazard. The *Tribune* sent public announcements of this, and many agreed. "The absence of rain for three weeks has left everything in so flammable a condition. . . ," reported the *Tribune*. The *Chicago Tribune* wanted action. The paper stated that it would keep printing these complaints until progress was made. Meanwhile, the Tribune Building had been redone with fireproof materials for protection. But this "fireproof" building actually

had a wooden roof, making it a wasted effort. However, the *Chicago Tribune's* predictions came true on October 7, 1871, when a small fire erupted; it was the prequel to a much more devastating conflagration the next day, the Great Chicago Fire.

As the city panicked, *Tribune* workers calmly stayed in their workplaces; for they were “safe” in their “fireproof” building. They continued to routinely print. Because of the building’s wooden roof, it burned down. The newspaper was able to continue printing two days after the fire. It was important to give news of the fire to inform others.

On October 10, 1871, the *Tribune* started publication again. The spirits of Chicago soon rose. The newspaper convinced Chicagoans to “CHEER UP!”. The article, by Joseph Medill, stated, “Chicago still exists. . . .CHICAGO SHALL RISE AGAIN.” And then came hope, spreading quicker than the fire. The confidence given to the people by the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper helped by giving them the will to take action, which was helped by a truth revealed by the *Tribune*. Even before the fire, Chicago was slightly underdeveloped. If people would get out of their confusion and sorrow, to help, Chicago would recover faster. Almost immediately after this message was printed, many Chicagoans heeded it.

Much of the help provided by the *Tribune* was because of its workers. William Bross was one of these people. When the Tribune Building was destroyed, he went to New York to get equipment for printing. He got more on this trip, though. Bross was the first witness of the fire to go to New York, and talked to reporters. Thanks to him, the news was spread farther around the country. Bross

assured businessmen, especially bankers, that Chicago would rise again. He also encouraged them to visit Chicago after it was rebuilt. His influence reached people outside Chicago. Money was donated to the cause. Back in the city, Bross made a speech in the middle of the streets that told about Chicago's growth. Probably the most important person associated with the Great Chicago Fire was Joseph Medill, another of the *Tribune's* workers. Later Medill was voted mayor of Chicago, and passed the Union Fireproof Ticket, which enforced stricter building codes, so that the burnt-down buildings would be rebuilt of stone or brick, and other stricter fire-safe rules were engaged. The city had become much safer from fire; this is what should have happened before to heed the *Tribune's* warning.

This chapter of American life involved the *Chicago Tribune* significantly. This newspaper was a great help to the city then, but its impact reaches people today. Chicago's buildings were once poor. But the fire is why those buildings are better. Skyscrapers were made to replace some of the buildings; it was ideal for business, and helped the economy.

The fire influenced Chicago and other places as well. During and after the destruction of the city, some people moved away for personal safety from the city or the area of the city in which the fire had struck. Those families and individuals affected those who lived where they do today. Instead of living in one part of Chicago, they live in another, or instead of living in Chicago, they live in another city or state. People also moved *to* Chicago after the fire, thanks to Bross, who convinced people to move to Chicago when it recovered. Chicago improved as a result. With an even larger population, there would be more to employ, therefore a

better economy, and it goes back to what Bross and the *Tribune* said. The *Chicago Tribune* truly did influence Illinois because of its coverage on the Great Chicago Fire.

In conclusion, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote about fire prevention to help Chicago avoid disaster; and during the Great Chicago Fire's attack, the *Tribune* continued to help by giving detailed fire coverage and confidence-boosting stories, which became essential to Chicago's recovery. The *Tribune* helped motivate Chicago to rebuild itself. It became one of America's most populous cities. Without the *Chicago Tribune*, the city of Chicago would not be as developed, modern, or populous. [From John Ashenhurst and Ruth L. Ashenhurst, *All About Chicago*; Dynise Balcavage, *The Great Chicago Fire*; Elizabeth McNully, *Chicago Then and Now*; Donaly L. Miller, *City of the Century*; "100 Years After the Fire." *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1971; Mary Kay Phelan, *The Story of the Great Chicago Fire, 1871*; Troy Taylor, "The Great Chicago Fire: 'the Greatest Disaster our City has Ever See,.'" *Weird and Haunted Chicago*. 2000.

<[http://www.prairieghosts.com/great\\_fire.html](http://www.prairieghosts.com/great_fire.html)> (Sept. 3, 2007); "The Tribune Reports to Chicago on its Own Destruction." *Chicago Tribune*. (2007)

<<http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/conflag/tribune.html>> (Sept. 30, 2007); and Lloyd Wendt, *Chicago Tribune*.]